

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Elisabeth Holdsworth, *Those Who Come After* (Picador, 2011)

Set in Europe, 1950s Elsternwick, Victoria, and Goulburn, NSW, *Those Who Came After* pulled me in, offering an accomplished unravelling of tales about a Zeeland family bound up with the Dutch House of Orange.

The cover of the lovely hardbacked Picador production depicts a small woman in high heels, her head angled slightly against the winter branches of a chestnut tree that leans as if holding on to a barren snow-clad landscape. Golden birds fly west across the sky and have been taken up again as motifs for the hard cover beneath the dust jacket. The end paper composition, front and back, resembles a stained old photograph of wartime children in winter coats, using two scooters to bar pedestrian-access to a cobbled street.

Narrated in first-person past and present tense, by Juliana, a glamorous and ferociously intelligent Australian diplomat, perhaps a spook, poised to retire and write a memoir, the story sweeps back and forth in time and through the lives of three generations of her family descended from Charlemagne. As a more contemporary counterpoint, Holdsworth offers a complex web of the protagonist's relationships with three Australian men: psychiatrist Phillip de Vere, perhaps her greatest love; husband Oscar, an academic; singing prodigy Frederick, and Michael Munroe, his brother, and her onetime boss.

Very little happens, however, in the immediate present of this fast-paced novel, or perhaps I was just disoriented by the rapid changes of scene and time; in any event, the narrator's stoic, honest voice anchored me. Past events tumble over each other – snakebite, life-threatening illnesses, many deaths, kidnapping, two wars, the cruel suffering of horses, and the murder of an uncle – as Holdsworth revisits important hooks, releasing more and more information, until five plot points resolve in rapid succession in the final pages.

The narrative opens when the protagonist arrives by train in Middleburg – the centre for Walcherin, an island built entirely from the silt of European rivers – after the death of her only surviving relative Tante (Lady) Katrien Stolburg at the family castle. The paratext provides a welcome map because Holdsworth uses the Zeeland setting as a conceit for her efforts to secure her family history: claimed and reclaimed and washed away by turns, during tumultuous political times.

Within a few paragraphs of arriving in Middleburg, we flash back to Juliana at a Luxemburg cocktail party, grumbling Mahler-obsessed husband in tow, for the unveiling of an art installation – a steam-powered train excreting foul-smelling black sausage (Belgian artist Wim Delvoye's 'Cloaca', now installed at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, in Tasmania). Inner monologue satirises Eurocrats 'no longer interesting to anyone except ourselves' (5). But Juliana is at the end of stellar career and her fertile years, and feels depressed: what will she do about her husband?

Next, the narrative leaps forward to Tante Katrien's deathbed request that Juliana retell the Stolburg story: 'only the last 100 years or so should be mentioned' and 'the Japanese connection need not be dwelt on' (11). Soon after, Juliana takes official custody of five strands of black pearls and rues the loss of a cornelian ring bestowed on her Japanese paternal grandmother, by Emperor Meiji. Who could make up a life as extravagantly rich? Just so, Holdsworth shares some of the protagonist's

Book reviews: *Those Who Come After* by Elisabeth Holdsworth. Gay Lynch.

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circumstances. She too was 'born in the Netherlands just after World War II, spent her early life in the south-west province of Zeeland before migrating to Australia with her parents in 1959' (blurb). Many readers will return, as I did, to her prize-winning *ABR* Calibre essay ('An die Nachgeborenen: For those who come after'¹), and her subsequent 2008 essay ('Missing from my own life'²) in which she rues the difficulties of finding a voice to write this story, having tried memoir and essay, and settling finally on fiction.

Present at each important family member's deathbed, Juliana is privy to secrets. The book title, translated from Bertolt Brecht's *Nachgeborenen* – beloved by her mother – refers to her daughter's childhood friends who survive an epidemic of rheumatic fever. Doted on by her grandfather Siegfried and his Japanese wife Francois, whom he married in 1899 in Nagoya while on an East India trade mission, and by her father, Lord Stolburg, or Spanish Jack Zeeuws, resistance fighter and champion of the postwar repair of the dykes, Juliana is a precious child. She manages only a fraught relationship with her beautiful mother, who survived the University of Dachau, and is tolerated by Katrien, the single aunt, who serves as lady in waiting, for sixty years, three Queens of the Netherlands.

The story loops back to post WW2 Australia, where Juliana attempts, through tragedy and misfortune, to hold her family together, most acutely when her mother places the Stolburg inheritance at risk. Razor-sharp asides show her to be a girl determined to realise her ambitions and, at the same time, take care of people who thwart them. Blue-blood resourcefulness and selflessness allow her to support her only protector, faithful Philly: at risk himself, in conservative 1950s Australia. Rationalising the family antiques – jewels, furniture and books – she enters the public service to secure her university education, and fast-tracks a big career, working on hush-hush projects that result in overseas postings.

Her sister-in-law, stuck on the family farm, remarks 'how can she complain ... beautiful clothes, plenty of money, European culture, travel and prestige ...'

Holdsworth frequently writes with visceral frankness, shirking no detail that will empower the narrative, but alternates this mood with pragmatism, using irony: the Third Reich's Atlantic Wall or 'the rubbish the Germans left behind'; bird shit on ballroom floors; and mess at the rear of castles. The first Australian sections, with attendant vernacular, pulled me up like a swinging shithouse door – 'Spotted dick' and 'Jam roly-poly' can be hard to digest even as phallic referents, and suffer by comparison with the 'glorious pellucid light of Zeeland'.

Description of Juliana's husband initially jars: his smile boomerangs and his penis is apparently capable of permutation. I have never seen a penis permutate but then I haven't seen the Tokyo Shock Boys.

A superficially exemplary husband, Oscar follows his breadwinning wife to the continent, filling his time teaching, indulging his great love of classical music and opera, and intuitively purchasing sanitary napkins. Thankfully, Holdsworth doesn't beat the sausage motif to death by labelling him a snag, preferring to link poor Juliana's regular inundations with the flooding that traumatised her childhood.

For the most part, her prose is sure-footed, as she curates a mass of historical material, with great humour and an engaging authorial voice.

¹ *Australian Book Review* (February 2007) 19-29.

² *Australian Book Review* (October 2008) 31-34.

‘Bugger, bugger, bugger,’ Oscar grumps after interrupted sex (48). Readers will register the hits Juliana takes, telegraphed by puns. Could the author/memoirist have let down her guard more, instead of being so capable: told the storyteller family archivist alter-ego to chill? Perhaps.

‘Fuck off, then’, she dismisses Oscar, when he can’t take care of his own mother. Juliana maintains a respectful relationship with his sister, homely Joanie, and manages to make us like her.

As I dashed towards the book’s denouement, I worried for Elisabeth Miriam Esther de Rijke-Nassau and her fictional protagonist: the last of their brilliant line and, no doubt, as imperially mercurial and colourful as the small lion on the Stolburg standard. The slippage between their two lives made me wonder who would look after *them*, now that their story has been told and the gun has been disposed of: a clever *bravissimo* performance.

Gay Lynch